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ORANGE COUNTY

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HOMESTEAD: This Way of Life Used to Be Common in Orange County

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Soon, the developer will be bulldozing the two World War I-era army barracks that served as Thomas' family home, as well as a dilapidated, reddish-brown barn where Thomas' grandfather used to put out a barrel to collect rainwater cascading off the roof.

"It's devastating to me," Thomas said sadly last week as he packed up his belongings to move in temporarily with some local relatives. "The hardest part about moving is the emotional feeling."

Thomas' homesteading way of life used to be commonplace in Orange County when huge ranches and farms covered hundreds of thousands of acres, said Orange County Farm Bureau Manager Thelma Moses. Today, Moses estimates there are only 60,000 acres of agricultural land left in the county.

During the early part of this century, as many as a dozen large ranches were spread across the hills and flatlands south of what is now Irvine, said Priscilla Hoel, a tour guide for the county's Heritage Hill Historical Park in El Toro. It was a time when workers—like Thomas—relatively lived on the property free in exchange for their labor, Hoel said. Many, she added, were even allowed to plant their own small farms.

The wave of heavy urban development that rolled across Orange County following World War II led to the break-up of most of those ranches, Hoel said.

Today, no one knows how many ranch homesteaders are left in the county. But Gilbert Aguirre, senior vice president of Rancho Mission Viejo, which operates a 40,000-acre ranch in the south county, said there can't be more than a handful. Aguirre noted that his ranch only has "two or three" hands living on the property without having to pay rent.

"That was common years ago if a person spent that much time working a ranch," but that's a thing of the past," Aguirre said, adding that workers today can easily be brought in to the most rugged areas with 4-wheel-drive vehicles.

Thomas' grandfather, John Analo Ebargaray first homesteaded a hilltop in San Juan Capistrano in 1923 as part of his payment for working as foreman of the 300-acre Forster Ranch in Forster Canyon, Thomas said.

The ranch, also known as "Boca de la Playa" (mouth of the beach) because of its proximity to the sea, was a tiny remnant of a 6,800-acre spread that dated to 1846, when California still was part of Mexico, said Orange County historian Jim Sleeper.

Originally acquired as a Mexican land grant by a local justice of the peace, the ranch was purchased in 1882 by Marcos A. Forster, son of Orange County land baron Juan Forster, Sleeper said. Bits and pieces gradually were sold off by the Forster family.

Only a few hundred acres were left by the time Ebargaray, a Basque shepherd from France, arrived in Orange County. He used



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Troy Thomas leaves his family home with his possessions in two plastic bags, never to return.



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up almost every remaining acre of the little ranch by planting fields of barley and wheat in the canyon and allowing herds of as many as 300 sheep to graze along the rolling hillsides, Thomas said.

Thomas remembers a youth of hard work. For long hours, he recalled, he would have to stand on the back of a wagon pulled by a tractor and throw seeds out over the barley and wheat fields. Today, the wagon sits in the family's front yard, a rusted and forgotten relic.

Caring for sheep in the coyote-infested hills also was a mighty chore, Thomas said. The sheep were kept at night in a wooden corral near the bunkhouse, and dogs were kept at the ready.

Brush fires were also a constant concern, especially during periods of dry Santa Ana winds. A hillside of Forster Canyon still bears the scars of an immense brush fire 20 years ago that Thomas said very nearly enveloped the bunkhouse

before it was put out by firefighters.

"We had three vans and two pickups loaded just in case," Thomas recalled.

Even life's essentials weren't taken for granted. For many years, the family had to depend on a well for its water, Thomas said, and there was no indoor plumbing.

But there were plenty of good times, too. After the hard work of the day was over, ranch-hand families from miles around would converge on the then-tiny communities of San Juan Capistrano and El Toro to receive their daily mail and exchange gossip at the country store, Hoel said.

On weekends, Hoel said, the ranch hands kicked up their heels at a renowned dance hall in El Toro, which during the early part of this century served as a social Mecca for south Orange County.

There also was plenty of after-hours socializing at the ranch bunkhouses themselves. Thomas recalls vividly the big parties his grandfather held, in which Basque shepherders and their families from all over the south county would congregate in the Ebargaray's back yard to eat and drink all weekend.

Inside a stone pit there—now buried with garbage and debris—the Ebargarays would roast pig and lamb, butchered in the barn nearby. Atop a grill, now rusted and half-buried in weeds, they laid strips of meat to barbecue, Thomas said.

The fourth of July was always the most festive time, Thomas recalled, because it was both a national holiday and his grandfather's birthday.

The ranch continued operating until 1966, when Marcos Forster Jr. died and the land was sold to help pay inheritance taxes, said Pat Forster, Forster's son.

As Ebargaray and his wife had died shortly before Marcos For-

ster's death, Pat Forster said, a verbal agreement was made by the new landowner that all 14 of the couple's children would be allowed to live free on the property until they died or it was developed, whichever happened first.

The land changed hands several times after that, but it was never developed—although new housing developments have crowded in from all sides. The verbal agreement finally ended on Dec. 23, 1987, when Lucana Ebargaray Thomas—the last surviving sibling of John and Josefina Ebargaray—died of a kidney ailment.

By then, the only other family member living on the property was Lucana's son Troy. Troy Thomas has two older sisters, but they married and moved away.

□

Although he worked 14 years doing street repairs in Laguna Beach (he said he had been unemployed in recent years), Thomas continued living alone in the ranch house until Tuesday, when he was ordered off the property by TMC Developments Inc. of Costa Mesa, the latest property owner.

"As you know, your right to occupy the premises expired with your mother's passing away," TMC attorney Todd G. Olson told Thomas in a letter.

TMC Developments served Thomas notice two months ago that he would have to move by Dec. 1, because the company said it soon would be ready to build a residential planned community of more than 500 units.

But that moving date was extended until Tuesday to give Thomas time to try and get his affairs in order, said Mike Schliepinger, project director for TMC Communities, a branch of the development company. In addition, the company gave Thomas \$2,000 to assist in his relocation. Olson

noted in his letter that the company did not have to give Thomas anything.

Thomas glumly proclaimed that the money was not nearly enough to help him find a home in Orange County, where the average new home is selling for around \$300,000.

In the McCracken Hill development just across the street from the old ranch house, homes are selling from \$450,000 to nearly \$1 million.


Not, he said, is it enough to compensate for the anxiety he is having to endure from seeing his

family's home of 60 years swallowed up by development.

"It's just a bummer, that's all you can say," Thomas said. Nearby residents expressed sadness at seeing Thomas and his rustic way of life disappear forever from the hill.

"We're kind of sad because it's been part of us up here," said Leigh Braithwaite, a housewife who lives directly across Forster Canyon Road from the ranch house. She said Thomas was "heartbroken that he's leaving. He doesn't know any other place."

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